Northampton Picture Main Street

FAQ

Welcome to the City of Northampton's FAQ page for the Picture Main Street project. Mayor Gina-Louise Sciarra is committed to transparent and open communication, and this page serves as an ongoing effort to address any questions you may have.

Mayor Sciarra's aim is to provide data-driven answers that explain why the city is moving forward with this transformative initiative. Consider this a 'living document'—we will regularly update the content to ensure the information stays current and relevant to your concerns.

Thank you for your interest, and please don't hesitate to contact the Mayor's Office with additional questions.

1. PARKING

There are multiple questions about parking. Let's address them one at a time.

A. **I hear this project will reduce the overall number of parking spots downtown by about 57. It feels like it's already hard to find a spot.**

Multiple studies agree that downtown has enough parking. Within a block or two of where you're going, there is a spot - and remember that there is a parking garage with a bridge leading right into Thornes Market in the heart of downtown that always has spaces available, and the first hour is free. Numbers show that about 12% of the people who park there pay nothing, 20% pay just 75 cents for two hours, and another third pay $1.50 for three hours!

Northampton offers an experience as a downtown, and we know it's better than a mall that builds vast expanses of environmentally unfriendly parking lots designed for Black Friday. Our city offers a place where people want to come and hang out, and the Picture Main Street

project builds on that even further with more space for people to feel safe, dine on the sidewalk, and walk or roll side-by-side down the sidewalk.

Again, don't just take our word for it; multiple studies in the last twenty years, led by bona fide parking experts, back this up. Let's leave the parking myths in the rearview mirror.

- In 2014, Walker Parking Consultants found:

  "Overall, the parking system had capacity on our survey days, and that finding is consistent with informal observations made on other visits and with information provided by staff. Our off-street, public occupancy rates were very close to counts done in 2000 for a previous study (we found 83 percent peak occupancy, whereas the earlier study found 85 percent peak occupancy)...Our counts find that under most typical conditions, a driver should be able to find parking within a few blocks."

  The recommendations of this report largely mirror many of the measures enacted by Mayor Sciarra in March 2023 to address the REAL problem - circulation (the fact that cars stayed too long in prime parking spots at the wrong times).

- In 2022, Stantec parking expert Jason Schrieber shared in his parking system analysis:

  "In peak hours, Main Street is at full capacity and off-street lots are significantly below 85%. This observation can be reversed by adjusting pricing, rather than supply. When front door "Main Street" spaces are priced higher, more remote and less utilized spaces can be priced cheaper, or in times of low-demand, free."

  It was many of the recommendations of this report that were implemented in March of 2023.

Based on feedback from parking managers, enforcement officers, and downtown visitors, Mayor Sciarra believes that Main Street parking has improved. We're now collecting data for a six-month review of the changes made in March and will soon update residents. If more modifications are necessary, the city will make them - in the ongoing cycle of using scientific facts to inform good policy.

B. I love the angled parking spaces. It's too hard to parallel park.

If you love angled parking, good news! There will still be some on Main Street and all of Crafts Ave.

That said, studies show they're really unsafe - how many times has someone nearly backed into your lane from a parking spot while you were driving down Main Street? Imagine what it's like for a motorcycle or a bicycle that people can't see when pulling out! This is absolutely part of why Main Street is on the list as one of the most unsafe streets in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Most cities in the USA have parallel parking in their downtowns. In fact, even in Northampton, most of our main arteries are parallel parking - upper and lower Main Street, Pleasant Street, King Street, Gothic, Center, Strong… and so on. People park in all of those locations.

Of course, there are also 1,000 front-in parking spaces in lots just off Main Street and the E.J. Gare Garage. We have to embrace the idea that the city's success is not built on being able to park directly in front of a given store on Main Street; it's built on being a great place to visit, shop, see a show, and eat. We need to focus on what that means in the modern economy and build more of that. The Picture Main Street project is a critical, once-in-a-generation opportunity to use state funds to help us achieve what's next.

C. Angled parking is easier for visitors with disabilities.

Some definitely think so, and some prefer parallel. It depends on the individual and how their vehicle is set up to assist their disability. We've heard from fans of both approaches, which is why the Picture Main Street plan includes accessible spaces on Main Street that are both angled parking and parallel parking style.

The Picture Main Street plan also increases the number of accessible parking spots on Main Street by two additional spaces.

D. But 57 spaces? That seems like a lot!

The number of spaces on Main Street reduced by the Picture Main Street project (57) happens to be exactly the same number that is currently taken for the outdoor dining program. This is a live test of what it's like to live without those spaces, and it's worked to bring people back downtown since the pandemic! The numbers don't lie - the outdoor dining and other vibrancy activities downtown have restored the city's local receipts revenues like meal taxes - more space for more people really works!

2. BICYCLES ON MAIN STREET

A. Why do we need bike lanes on Main Street?

Since 2015, Northampton has been a part of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' Complete Street Program. "A Complete Street is one that provides safe and accessible options for all travel modes - walking, biking, transit, and vehicles – for people of all ages and abilities."[1] This is already baked into Northampton's culture and governing philosophy - and the Picture Main Street project is just implementing the latest and best in urban design to realize these worthwhile goals.

From the first survey conducted in early 2020 and after several initial community meetings, the following top 5 goals were identified for the redesign:

1. Café seating with wider sidewalks
2. Protected bike lanes
3. High-visibility crosswalks
4. Art crosswalk
5. Street closure

Dedicated bike lanes are great for everyone. They result in fewer injuries, improved traffic flow, safer sidewalks, they're better for the environment, and they make people healthier.[2]

B. We've got a great bike path that goes right next to Main Street on the rail trail - why can't cyclists just use that?

They can, and they do - but cyclists have a legal right to use Main Street (and every street) safely.

It can be hard to change our way of thinking about our roads, but we must. The fact is bicycles, pedestrians, and cars use Main Street - and each has an equal right to a safe amount of space to enjoy. Bicycles should be able to ride down the street and have a chance to pull up next to their destination on Main Street just like a car does. It's not equitable to say they should be relegated to just the bike path.

The good news is that there's plenty of room for every kind of transportation people want to use. The science shows that we can accommodate separated bike lanes on Main Street without harming traffic flow.

Current and future bicycle and pedestrian access must be incorporated, and the community has overwhelmingly supported (66%) separate bike lanes on Main Street. This, coupled with the engineering analysis required for MassDOT's pre-25% submittal that describes safety tradeoffs for different treatment types, led to the separated lane being selected above others by the traffic safety specialists.

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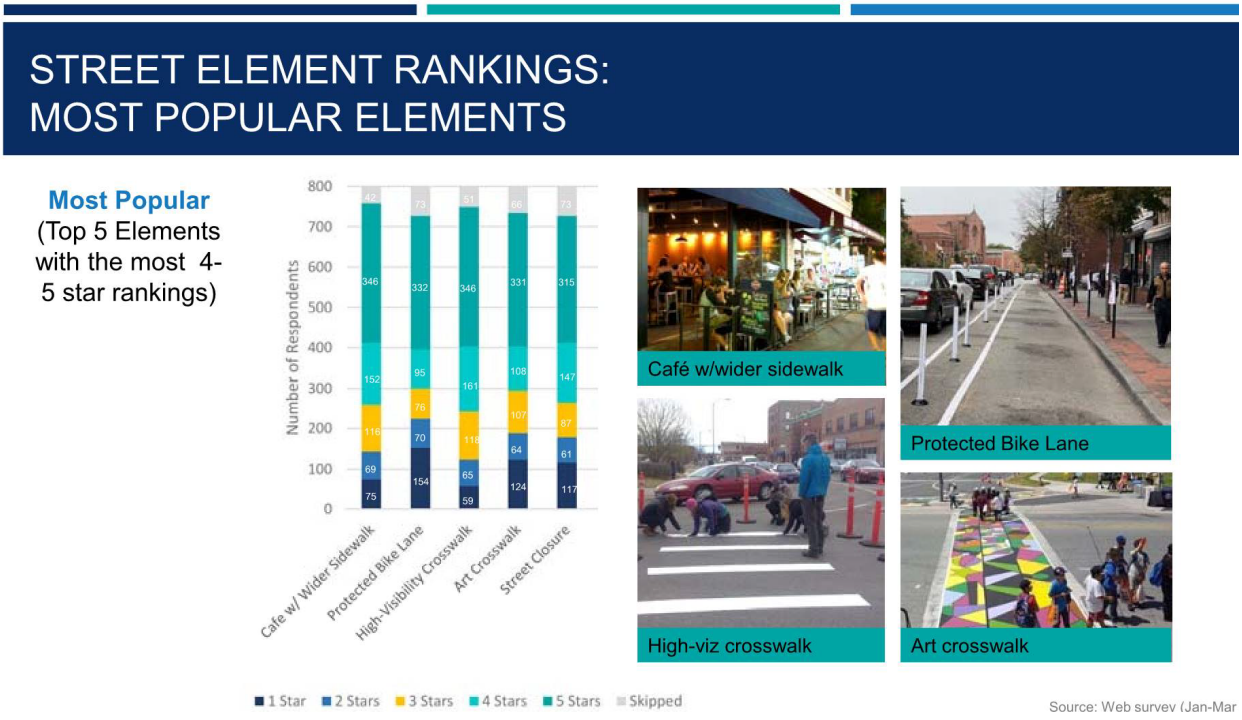
[1] Commonwealth of Massachusetts' Complete Streets Funding Program
[2] 6 Benefits of Bike Lanes

The Picture Main Street plan reallocates space that previously has only focused on wide, inconsistent, and dangerous vehicle lanes and assigns it to be shared with the other road users so that it's genuinely a Main Street for everyone. Again, while today's Main Street caters to vehicles, the redesign will ensure that Main Street is equitable, viable, and accessible for all. Numerous stakeholder meetings, surveys, and community meetings were held to evaluate interests and tradeoffs selected by residents. This information is accessible here.



C. I've heard that separated bike lanes aren't safer - and that there's a study out there that proves it.

Some have raised concerns about bicycle/pedestrian conflicts with a separate lane. The lane will elevate cyclists and make them more visible to vehicles and pedestrians. Cyclists will thus be easier to see by pedestrians than if they were in the lane of traffic blocked from view by parked cars.

Others point to an article in Forbes Magazine claiming that separated bike lanes are not safer. This article was written by a person who works at a conservative think tank focusing on energy and the environment and who has written extensively advocating for increased use of fossil fuels, more pipelines, and

looser environmental regulations, including a book titled *Regulating to Disaster: How Green Jobs Policies are Destroying America's Economy*. The study she cites in the article was a master's thesis, not a peer-reviewed study. Just over a month and a half later, the same magazine - Forbes - published a story entitled, "Protected Bike Lanes Increase Safety, Save Money And Protect The Planet, New Report Finds."

3. TRIAL RUN

A. This is such a huge undertaking that it's common sense to set up a trial run to ensure this will work.

We do not have the ability to conduct a demonstration project that would put all the pieces accurately together. We are moving toward 75% design details based on the volume of study, community input, community goal setting, and engineering expertise regarding road diet and safety improvements.

There is no part of the Picture Main Street design that will be implemented for the first time with this project. These are tried and true strategies that have been tested by engineering experts all over the country. Northampton is not the first municipality to implement this type of roadway redesign. Similar implementations have occurred throughout the Commonwealth, and the design and solutions have been thoroughly tested and proven effective.

For example, there are existing downtown streets in Northampton with greater traffic volumes than Main Street that have two lanes with parallel parking (King Street, Lower Main Street, Pleasant Street), which shows us that traffic can be accommodated and function with emergency access.

The proposed redesign is not just about physical changes to the street. The project involves interrelated measures that would be impossible to implement in a trial run. Some of these measures would require long lead times. If we only do the easy stuff and leave out important elements, a trial run will not show how the system will actually work. Rather, it will be a waste of time and money.

Aside from the technical reasons why this won't work listed below, it takes *time* for people to get used to using a new layout and to develop new habits. The period of a trial run would be a little like the first week of actual plan implementation, only worse. Think about the roundabouts that have been successfully implemented here and elsewhere. When they were first proposed, many people were horrified and were convinced they wouldn't work. And when they first went in, there was plenty of confusion as people struggled to learn how to navigate them. We all know that the roundabout at the Coolidge Bridge has forever changed Friday afternoon coming from Amherst.

To further explain why a trial run is not simply a low-cost matter of placing cones in the street to see how it works, here are just some of the specific measures that would have to be part of a realistic trial run:

1. Signal timing - one of the main causes of congestion on Main Street is the timing of traffic lights. Changing signal timing involves engineering analysis and the acquisition and installation of new signal modules. Further, the location of some of the signals will be changing to allow for more queue space, which is also tied to the engineering of the signal timing. Such significant changes are not feasible as a trial.
2. Special zones - for loading and accessible access require approvals that would be hard to obtain and implement on a trial basis and require planned accessibility improvements that can't be done temporarily. The plan addresses the need for safe access for people with different abilities.
3. Signage – any changes must be accompanied by clear signage. This requires significant planning and fabrication for which there is no current budget. However, this will be included in the MassDOT-funded project.
4. Restriping for vehicles, bike/ped zones - this must be done clearly and understandably and is not possible to do as a temporary measure, as it will involve measurements based on changed road geometry.
5. To simulate the three-lane design, the median islands on Main Street would have to be removed for the trial period and then put back afterward. This would require demolition and reconstruction of infrastructure.

Thus a trial run cannot be developed to accomplish what is intended by the Picture Main Street design. However, we have dozens of examples of these treatments being implemented successfully elsewhere.

That being said, one component of the Picture Main Street design has been successfully tested for the last three years - see FAQ 1.D.

4. TRAFFIC STUDY

A. There haven't been traffic studies to make sure this will work.

This is incorrect. MassDOT requires a study as part of the justification for the proposed design. In January 2021, Toole Design submitted its 967-page Functional Design Report with all the data, statistics, and analysis that form the backbone of the proposed design solution. This report is linked within the Storymap on the city's website. MassDOT engineers spent months reviewing the submittals to ensure that the standards and design justification were met. They do not allow a project to move forward to the 25% design public hearing until this data has been fully vetted.

5. MAIN STREET NEEDS 4 LANES

A. Can two lanes handle as much traffic as four lanes?

Let's be clear: Main Street doesn't have four lanes today. Upper and lower Main Street are one lane in each direction with parallel parking on either side. It's the width of middle Main Street where drivers create additional, undefined "lanes" and this space is used to weave in and out of other traffic which creates an unsafe condition for all other users.

The Storymap describes the pros and cons of a design alternative that defines four lanes of traffic in the section of Main Street that could accommodate this. The result is sidewalks that would be less than 5' wide and unable to accommodate ADA-compliant restaurant use, narrower curb extensions, and fewer trees, to name a few. This would be inconsistent with all the public input supporting the goal of wider sidewalks and safer crosswalks.

Some examples:

- Cottage Street in Easthampton has higher traffic volumes (~16,000 trips) than Main Street (12,000 to 13,000) and operates with two lanes and parallel parking.
- Concord, NH implemented a three-lane street in place of a four-lane street and also carried 12,000 vehicles per day.
- Russell Street in Hadley was approved and constructed by MassDOT to narrow from four to three lanes (turning lane) with 21,000 daily vehicle trips vs. 12-13,000 daily in Northampton.
- The lower Main Street section of Main Street (from King/Pleasant to Market/Hawley) has the highest traffic volume on Main Street (~13,000 vehicles per day) and is already mostly two lanes with parallel parking.

Of the several design alternatives developed based on public comments, surveys, and stakeholder meetings, the final alternative approved by MassDOT to move forward was selected as a compromise that met the publicly generated goals of the project to a much greater degree than the other alternatives. The analysis of the alternatives reviewed with the goals is included in the functional design report and Storymap.

6. CONGESTION/CLIMATE CONCERNS WITH THREE LANES

A. Narrowing the width of Main Street will cause extreme traffic congestion.

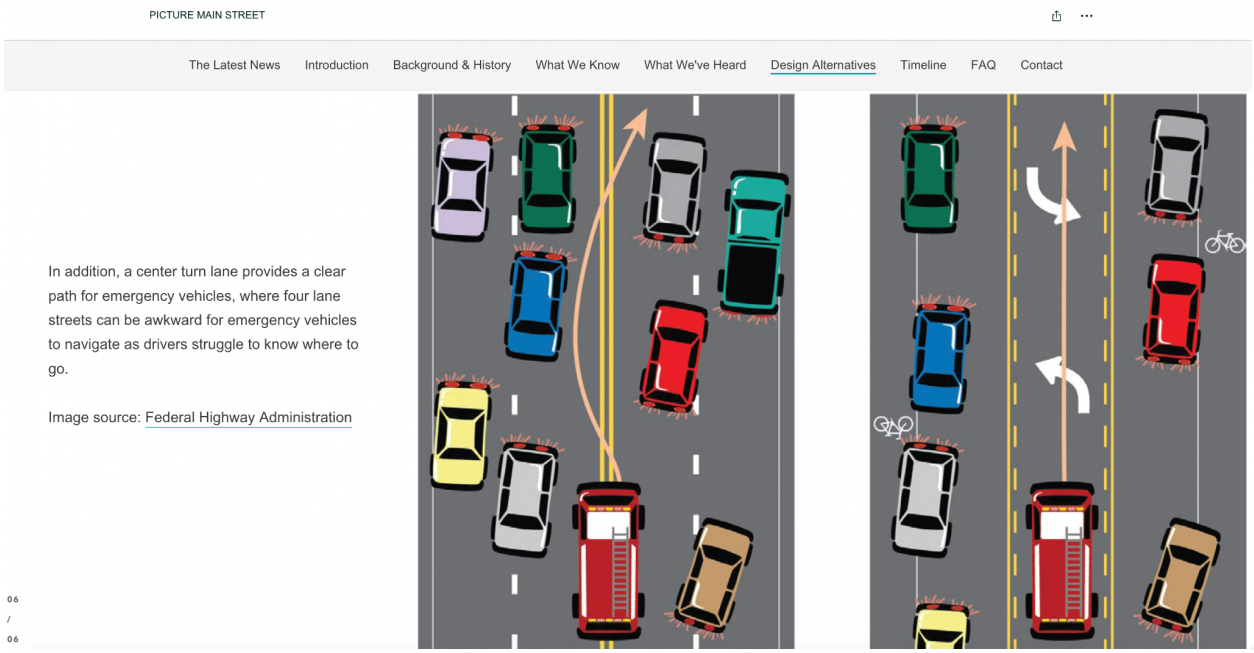
Traffic jams in the project area are mostly due to outdated signal timings at four key intersections. We covered this in our 25% design public hearing and it's backed by in-depth engineering studies. Lower Main Street, which has a higher traffic volume, already functions well. Our plan—adding a third turning lane, clearly marking lanes, reducing crossing distances,

and updating signal timings—will manage traffic flow without reducing current capacity. Much of this congestion is created when drivers weave within the width of the roadway that is not clearly delineated. All four signalized intersections will have new signal modules and technology to manage flow in a coordinated pattern.

7. EMERGENCIES AND PUBLIC SAFETY EQUIPMENT

A. I hear that emergency vehicles won't be able to make it through the new design.

In the initial planning and throughout the planning stages, the Fire/Rescue Department and Police Department reviewed the plans and whatever adjustments they thought were important were made. Both the Fire/Rescue Chief and the Police Chief fully support the approved design. Most of Northampton's roads are two lanes, and our plan adds a third center turning lane. This extra lane allows for smoother emergency vehicle passage, especially when cars comply with the Commonwealth's emergency vehicle and 'Move Over Laws.' The new three-lane design will actually be wider than existing lanes on Pleasant Street, Lower Main Street, and King Street up to Stop & Shop.



8. SNOW REMOVAL

A. Right now, during a snowstorm, the city piles the snow in the middle of the street. Where is the snow going to go in this new design?

We recognize that snow management will change with the new layout. Unlike Northampton, most northern cities don't have wide enough streets to store snow in the middle. Our design team has studied how similar communities handle snow removal effectively. This includes Edmonton, Canada, St. Paul, MN, Madison, WI, Cambridge/Somerville/Greenfield, MA, and Burlington, VT. The DPW has been consulted on the change and is developing a plan for snow removal and storage.

9. IMPACT ON BUSINESSES

A. **Northampton already has lots of vacant storefronts. I'm worried that already stressed businesses will have to close and I've heard many business owners downtown don't support this.**

We're keenly aware that construction will present challenges for our downtown businesses and residents alike. The project, spread over three seasons, will have phases of intense activity followed by quieter periods. This cyclical nature offers both challenges and windows of opportunity. To navigate this, we're in close collaboration with the business community and Toole Design to strategize ways to mitigate the impact and maximize business benefits. Our city's economic development team is also actively brainstorming events, exhibits, and special programming to draw people downtown and support businesses during the construction phases.

B. **I've heard that there are no plans for how to handle construction and the city won't say what the schedule will be and what will be the impact on businesses and traffic.**

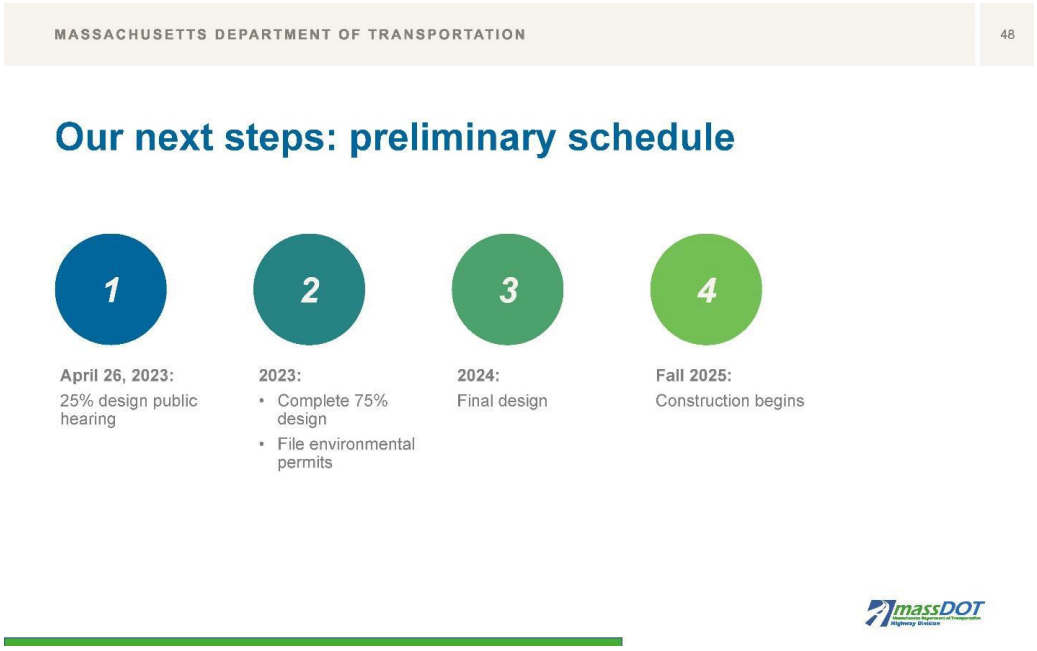
As stated from the beginning of this project and reiterated in the public hearing, it is critical to develop a construction phasing plan that minimizes impact on downtown businesses to the greatest extent feasible. Mayor Sciarra is actively working on strategies to mitigate the impacts of construction on businesses and every other downtown user. There is nothing more that everyone working on this project would love to talk about than how to plan for the period during the construction of this project.

Northampton recently completed its 25% submission to the MassDOT TIP program. From here, MassDOT works with our consultants on the details of the project, mapping out the finest details and measuring the inches between specific elements of the plan. In order to get here, Northampton had to provide detailed technical specifications and demonstrate that there had been significant public input to the process. MassDOT held the public hearing in Northampton in April 2023.

Toole Design is currently working on the 75% design plans that will meet the criteria for submission to MassDOT. After this submittal, Toole will help the city develop a cost and

time-effective plan with business community feedback for phasing construction to minimize the impact on downtown businesses. We are very eager to work with downtown stakeholders to develop plans, strategies, and communication tools to keep everyone informed and engaged during construction and to incentivize people to come downtown during that time.

Here is the timeline given during the public hearing. This may be pushed back depending on the length of review time undertaken by MassDOT.



10. DELIVERY VEHICLES

A. Where can trucks unload if not in the middle?

The plans for the redesign incorporate dedicated truck loading/unloading spaces on lower Main Street as well as four locations on upper Main Street. These are distributed between the north and south sides and the east and west ends of Main Street. Unloading at the curb is far safer for the drivers who will not be stepping into traffic to unload and for pedestrians, cyclists, and vehicles who will not have oncoming traffic obscured by the large trucks parked in the middle of the road.

11. TREE CANOPY

A. I hear this plan cuts down trees downtown - how is that a good idea?

The city's Tree Warden and the Northampton Urban Forestry Commission fully support removing many of Main Street's existing trees, which are in varying states of health and some nearing the end of their life cycle, and planting a more extensive and healthier tree canopy. This

is based on a thorough 2021 tree health assessment. The current trees were often planted in insufficient space, compromising their health. In their place, we'll be planting a substantial number of new, healthy trees in a more sustainable manner—increased soil volume, connected trenches, and structural soil. These improvements aim to extend tree lifespan and prevent sidewalk damage. Tree planting isn't an afterthought; our design intentionally allocates space for healthy tree growth. We'll be increasing the overall tree count by 36. It's worth noting that in our Picture Main Street survey, 80% of respondents ranked new trees and green infrastructure as their top priority.

12. MISREPRESENTATION OF FOUR-MILE RADIUS

A. **My customers are not just people who can walk and bike into town or only those who live within a four-mile radius. Even if I live within four miles, I still don't want to have to bike or walk.**

No one is suggesting that anyone must walk or bike downtown. If someone needs or wants to drive downtown, there is plenty of parking to accommodate them - see FAQ 1. This data point is meant to show that many of the city's residents have walking or biking access to downtown and may opt to come downtown this way, particularly if the road is made safer. The redesign is planned to create a safe space for all who arrive by whatever chosen mode. Those who park and walk to various destinations need to have safe spaces like those who arrive by walking or biking.

13. ACCESSIBILITY

A. **I've heard some people say that this redesign will make it harder for people with accessibility issues to navigate or park. Some say that accessible/handicapped spaces are being removed for the redesign.**

We've heard questions and concerns about the project's impact on accessibility. It's crucial to set the record straight: improving accessibility is one of the core goals of the Picture Main Street redesign. Whether you're navigating public spaces or accessing private buildings, the new design aims to make life easier, especially for those facing mobility challenges or age-related issues.

Main Street currently faces multiple accessibility challenges—narrow and uneven sidewalks, as well as curb ramps and signals that fail to meet national accessibility standards. These issues restrict the mobility and independence of residents and visitors alike. The new design aims to fix this by shortening crosswalks, dedicating separate lanes for different modes of transportation, ensuring at least five feet of clear sidewalk space, and increasing the number of accessible

parking spots. There will be two more accessible parking spaces than what we have now, many of which will be angled for those who find that to be easier access.
Our partner, Toole Design, has incorporated numerous public comments into their plans. Supported by current engineering best practices, their design includes several key changes that will improve both mobility and access on Main Street.

Specific ways the Picture Main Street project improves access:

1. The plan narrows traffic lanes and shrinks the curb-to-curb distance, making it easier and quicker to cross the street. The narrowing varies between 10 and 20 feet depending on the section.
2. Curb extensions at all nine Main Street crosswalks and intersecting side streets will reduce pedestrian exposure to traffic. For example, the rainbow crosswalk will go from 90' to 41', and the City Hall crosswalk from 65' to 31'.
3. Wider sidewalks will accommodate side-by-side walking and make it easier for wheelchairs and strollers to pass without obstruction from street furniture like light poles or trash bins.
4. A designated "furnishing zone" will house benches, trash bins, and other amenities, allowing people to rest or eat without blocking the walkway.
5. Traffic lights will feature a "leading pedestrian phase," giving pedestrians a head start before cars move. This is especially beneficial for wheelchair users who may be less visible to drivers.
6. Changes in the curb line, particularly on the south side of Main Street, will shift crosswalks to more level ground, meeting ADA slope requirements and improving safety at tricky intersections like Crafts Avenue and Old South Street.
7. Relocating crosswalks at Main/State/New South and West/Elm/Main will offer safer, shorter distances—40' instead of 62'.
8. New gravel bases and landscaping belts will support level sidewalks less prone to heaving, reducing tripping hazards.
9. Where possible, sidewalk grades will align with business entrances to improve wheelchair accessibility. Notable opportunities exist at the corner of Center and Main.
10. Besides the recently added accessible parking, we'll add two more spaces, offering both angled and parallel options based on user feedback.

14. CONCERNS ABOUT COST AND/OR MONEY

A. **We shouldn’t be wasting city money on changes that aren’t needed.**

As of right now, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is picking up $19 million dollars of the cost to make Main Street safer, accessible, vibrant, and environmentally friendly. At the same time, Mayor Sciarra has set aside $3 million worth of American Rescue Plan Act funds to upgrade all of the city's 100+ year-old water, sewer, and drainage infrastructure while construction is underway. That project is decades overdue, and we'll never have a better opportunity. Without Picture Main Street/DOT covering street excavation, the city would be paying substantially more than $3M for the water and sewer upgrades as we would bear the full cost of excavation.

These things have to happen. There are laws and regulations about how they have to happen. The Picture Main Street project is the result of years of careful planning, community discussion, and compromise that drove a solution that will ensure our downtown continues to be a place where people want to live, work, and play in the future.

15. SAFETY

A. **I hear that it's not true that Main Street isn't safe, or that it isn't that bad. I hear that the accident data is cherry-picked and exaggerated to justify the project. There have to be safer ways to do this that are less costly and less drastic.**

This claim is especially troubling because it is completely untrue and we are talking about people's safety. The data shows that Main Street is really unsafe and we have to fix it. In addition to the actual data, our public safety experts will tell you that it is a location they must respond to for accidents very often.

The safety data described in the 25% design public hearing was a snapshot of the detailed safety audit and analysis mandated by MassDOT to be presented in order to justify the project. That analysis is available here. MassDOT engineers evaluated the city's design engineering analysis for 8+ months to ensure that the project met their standards.

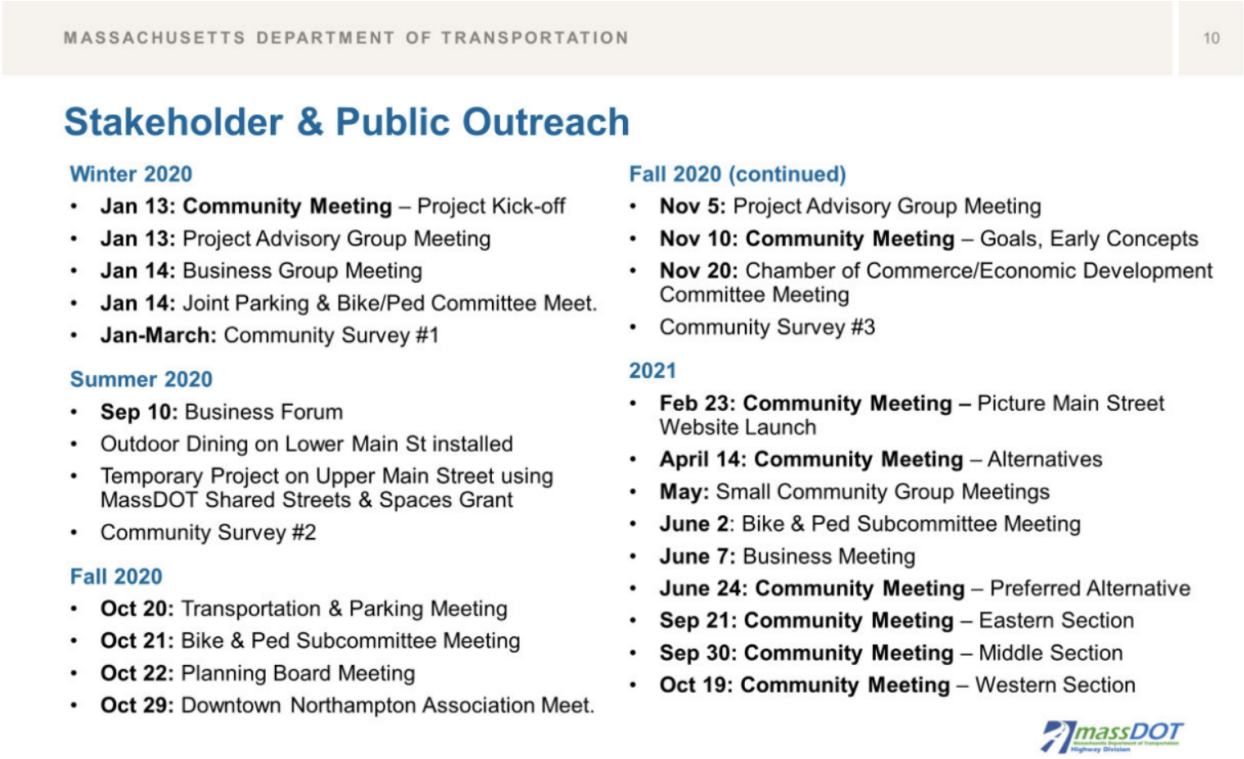
Neither the city nor the state would mischaracterize safety issues for any reason. People are getting hurt and that's why MassDOT has prioritized this project and is making such a significant investment in our city.

16. PUBLIC PROCESS

A. **There wasn't enough public input on this project. The city wants to do what it wants to do and doesn't want to hear what people think.**

This couldn't be further from the truth. There have been many, many public meetings about the Picture Main Street project, and one of Mayor Sciarra's first acts as a new mayor was to preserve more angled parking in the chosen plan based on feedback.

This slide was part of MassDOT's Public Hearing Presentation. Minutes and some recordings can be found at northamptonma.gov. This is not even a comprehensive list of all public meetings, because many city committees, commissions, and boards had public, legally posted meetings about the project as well.



17. MISCELLANEOUS

A. They're going to eliminate the pedestrian-only signal at Main and King Streets - that's my favorite!

The all-way simultaneous pedestrian signal has been said to be a different or charming feature of this intersection. However, this feature is not safe and does not meet safety standards for today's streets. This is because it creates long delays for both pedestrians, who have to wait full long signal cycles to cross, and for vehicles that have to wait a longer ped signal before the green. This extra length of time also affects all the other signals in the corridor.

Because of these long delays, pedestrians are more likely to walk against the signal and risk harm. Similarly, vehicles are likely to speed through a red to avoid waiting for the cycle for green again. The safer solution designed for these intersections is called a “leading pedestrian interval” which allows pedestrians to cross with traffic, but they are provided the walk sign before the green vehicular signal. That puts them in the crosswalk ahead of vehicles in order to be visible.